

## *King County Journal*

### **Extra fee would help civil justice**

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The state's justice system for civil cases is hurting. Those without money are finding it next to impossible to bring or challenge actions in court. The result is that civil justice is not equal for all. It needs to be for our laws to have meaning.

A bipartisan bill introduced in the Legislature would help by placing a \$90 surcharge on the cost of filing a civil action in Superior Court and using some of the proceeds to fund a special account dedicated to equal civil justice. It's a good idea, and should be passed.

The proposal has been advanced by the Washington State Supreme Court's Civil Equal Justice Funding Task Force. The group argues that too many people can't seek justice because they can't afford it. As Justice Charles W. Johnson, chair of the task force, noted, ``this is unacceptable."

The bill in question, SB5846, would raise more than \$8 million a year, with 46 percent going to the civil equal justice account. The remainder would go to local government general funds, which have been hit by state cutbacks. The bill is endorsed by a number of legal and community organizations.

The need for civil legal services is widespread. Bill supporters estimate that more than one million residents are eligible for assistance. They include the elderly, families denied services to which they are entitled, and mothers and children fleeing domestic violence. At the same time, there are only 85 legal services attorneys in our state, 20 percent fewer than in 1999 and 40 percent fewer than in 1981.

This shouldn't be a tax or partisan issue. As bill cosponsor Sen. Larry Sheahan, R-Spokane, a lawyer with a private practice in Rosalia, notes, ``equal access to the law is a bedrock of our democracy." Passage of SB5846 will keep that bedrock from being eroded.